No. 19

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# THE HEROINES SHOWCASE

ECHO
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# The Women Wolfriders

SRJ

## and their sisters, their cousins, and their aunts

## by Deby Dunn

Elfquest *is an independently-produced, fantasy comic book that has been creating quite a stir in the comics industry and readership in recent years. There are a number of reasons for this. First, because the art and over-all appearance of the book are exceptionally good for an alternative publication. Second, because the quality and level of the writing is so high* – Elfquest *is intellectually and emotionally stimulating to read. And third, because* Elfquest *is probably the most successful comic book of its kind ever, which is undoubtedly a result of the factors above. I think that this alone ought to tell us something about the basic intelligence of* Elfquest*'s readers that most people in the comics industry never could seem to understand. Yes, there really are mature, intelligent comic book readers in the world, and* Elfquest *seems to attract and hold them in a way no other comic ever has – not because it is necessarily perfect, but because it tries.*

Elfquest *is the brainchild of Wendy and Richard Pini, one of the better known young couples in comics fandom. Their magic began in 1977 with the "little number one" in* Fantasy Quarterly. *There were problems with the original publisher almost at once, especially in the area of production quality. The response of the readers encouraged the Pinis to break away from him. They soon formed their own company (WaRP Graphics, i.e., Wendy and Richard Pini Graphics) and* Elfquest *took off from there.*

*Although the main subject of this article is the women of* Elfquest, *I cannot pass by the art in silence. It won't let me. The art is at least half of* Elfquest*'s success. Few artists in the comics business seem able to tell a story half as well as Wendy Pini. And few writers in the business have Richard Pini's faith in their artists. A good part of* Elfquest*'s characterization is supplied by the art alone. The pictures tell the story, which is what comics are about in the first place.*

*Wendy adeptly handles some thirty or more characters ranging from very young children to very old women, Elves, Trolls, and Humans, each as individuals. In foreground, background, and subject, an incredible amount of detail is present. Again and again, one is confronted by astounding beauty as one reads. I think it is safe to say that* Elfquest *would not be where it is today without the artistic skills of Wendy Pini.*

*But for all of that, perhaps because of that, the thing that makes* Elfquest *so unique is character. No other comic published today lavishes so much attention upon character. In addition,* Elfquest *is the first comic I have ever seen that is consciously "liberated" in both word and deed, and presents its lessons in a sensitive, inoffensive manner. It is not the kind of Feminist publication that specializes in screeched anti-male propaganda and bra-burning.* Elfquest *and its production team are responsible feminists who really think about feminism and have come to realize that* human *liberation is what it's really about.* Elfquest *is a comic book about human liberation. It unobtrusively makes its points, subtle or obvious, by presenting its material in a positive and convincing way.*

* * *

Four basic philosophical groups have emerged during the first ten issues of the *Elfquest* series. These are the Elves (divided into two tribes, Wolfriders and Sun Folk), the

Humans, and the Trolls. At this point let me say a few words about each.

Elves tend to be close to the earth. Natural cycles are an intimate part of their lives. The Wolfriders were the first Elves introduced, and their ranks provide most of the major characters. As their name implies, Wolfriders ride wolves. They are hunters from a primeval woodland, and are very much in contact with the paradoxical forces of life and death in the natural world. Everyone in the tribe hunts, except for pregnant women, and those with the very youngest of children. Yet rather than making them vicious killers, the Wolfriders' way of life reinforces an intense love of life and living. Wolfriders are also close to their bodies and the sensual world, and much is made of their trust in instinct. The night is their time, and physical exercise their joy.

*Leetah*

A second Elf tribe, the Sun Folk, lives in an isolated village in the desert. They also look to the earth for their way of life. The Sun Folk are farmers, however, and their lives focus on different earth cycles, primarily those of day and night, and the season. The sun is their great symbol, the day is their time, and their activities tend to be mental rather than physical.

*Nightfall*

Wolfriders and Sun Folk compliment each other. Each alone is only half of the Elf race. The Wolfriders are strong and vigorous, but lack the greater part of magical powers. The Sun Folk are possessed of ancient wisdom, but are far from participating fully in the life of the physical. The continuing encounter between the two tribes is an enriching experience for all.

Also, there is a third group of Elves, emerging from the Blue Mountain in a shadowy way. What little is known of them is disturbing and contradictory. As the Wolfriders bond with wolves, they bond with great birds. And, like the Sun Folk, they have displayed great magical powers. However, some sort of master-slave relationship has been shown between them and neighboring groups of Humans, and they have engaged in acts of violence unprecedented for Elves except in moments of desperation. What effect they will have upon the Wolfriders is hard to say, except that it is shaping up to be dramatic indeed.

*Joyleaf*

By contrast, we Humans tend to come off looking much less nice. At least in the beginning, *Elfquest*'s Humans seem to represent all that humanity likes least about itself. Following an intolerant religion into endless racial warfare with the Elves, the Humans would like nothing better than to practice genocide and have the world to themselves again. Dirty, brutal, strong rather than smart, superstitious rather than religious – as seen through the eyes of the Elves – they are at once terrifying and impotent, hating the Elves yet unable to do them any lasting harm. Humans fear the world around them (hence their concept of numerous nature spirits which at best are disinterested in human affairs), while they still wish to regard it as their own.

*Savah*

This dismal initial picture of humanity has lightened. A new side to the Humans emerged in #7 as we saw a human couple spared by the Elves because of their noble emotions. In #8, another young Human couple, Nonna and Adar, had the astounding assumption that Elves were not demons but godlings. They treated their Elfin guests as objects of veneration and openly confessed the humility they felt in the presence of the Elves' beauty and grace. In #9, their chief, Olbar the Mountain-tall, showed the ability to face his superstitious fear and conquer it, going on to form a new way of relating to the Elves.

Finally, there are the Trolls, whom the Elves seem to regard as only fractionally better than Humans (and the Trolls seem to return the sentiment). The best thing one can say about the Trolls, in fact, is that they are not Humans! The Trolls are, by most standards, phenomenally ugly, and that applies to their personalities as well as to their warty hides. Their only emotions seem to be unpleasant for others and selfish for themselves. Trolls are tried and true materialists. Love is a matter of wealth. "Any Troll worth his hammer knows that a maiden's love is as true as the gold he gives her," the Troll Picknose tells us in issue #7, "and the more gold, the more true her love!" Also, Trolls live underground in caverns, far from what we would see as contact with the natural world. They find it difficult to endure either sun- or moonlight.

The above sketches are great generalizations, of course. Each of *Elfquest*'s characters is an individual, acting as such. Time has wrought changes for all of them since the series began. One of the Wolfriders, Rainsong, has become almost like one of the Sun Folk. Others, like the Wolfrider Moonshade, continue to display a mild disdain for the peaceful ways of the Sun Folk. Most of the Wolfriders have managed to preserve their cultural integrity while keeping open minds toward the Sun Folk, attempting to learn from differences and similarities. Even Trolls and Humans are sometimes presented in a light which makes their unfriendly actions comprehensible, if not acceptable. There have been good Humans and less than likeable Elves.

The main focus of *Elfquest,* within the context of the four groups, is character, and especially characters in relationships.

Relationships. Those strange and elusive creations between two or more people that decide so much of our growth and personality. So fragile and so easily destroyed, and yet so strong, so supportive in times of need. So hard to put into words.

The many and varied relationships, with their parallels and intertwining, are the heart of *Elfquest.* Parents and children. Friends, both male and female. Lovers, married or not. There are more married couples, family groups and close tribal societies in *Elfquest* than in all the rest of comicdom put together. The two male leads, Cutter and Skywise, are best buddies. All the action of the first five issues is concerned with Cutter's efforts to win the hand of his life-mate, Leetah.

(Let us pause for a moment at this point to talk about marriage. Marriage in *Elfquest*-jargon is called "life-mating," which ought to say something about the kind of relationship Elvish society is based upon. None of this equal-but-not-quite-equal husband-and-wife business for them! Both partners are truly equal in life-mating, a bond that means exactly what it sounds like. "Life-mates." Mates for life, with all the long-term commitment that so often seems lacking in modern marriages. Neat, isn't it?)

Now that this is understood, we can begin to trace some common types of characters that come up in the course of the series' development, as exemplified by individuals. First, there are the female leaders who appear among Sun Folk, Trolls, and (to a much lesser extent) Humans.

Primary among these is Savah, Mother of Memory to the Sun Folk. I like the term "Mother of Memory" because it describes Savah's function so well. She is the keeper of lore and history for her tribe, the greatest magician, and (literally) the mother of them all, as one of the two women from whom the Sun Folk sprang. Savah is a living symbol of the past, and a focus for the emotions of her tribe. Even the eldest of them can find a mother and wise counselor in her, if they need. Her magical powers are all but forgot-

ten by the tribe, but the wisdom of a very long life is available, at need, through her. Savah seems to assume this role, not as a social custom, but out of her own personal aptitude and choice. Often she helps the Sun Folk wrestle with their problems, and when an explanation is needed, everyone immediately turns to Savah. Without her, the Sun Folk are virtually helpless.

Savah's counterpart among the Trolls is Maggoty, and her name tells it all. Maggoty is not quite as ancient to her small tribe of three as Savah is to the Sun Folk, yet in her distorted way she does reflect Savah's role with them. Maggoty is the oldest of the remaining Trolls (the rest of their race lost a war and got marched away to the frozen north, never to be seen again). She keeps most of their remaining lore and history, and all of the magic is hers. It is Maggoty who mixes up the sleeping powders the Trolls use to subdue their foes, and who brews up the wonderful dreamberry wine. Maggoty is a reflection of the differences between Elves and Trolls as she does not advise people what to do. No, she tells them, and her orders are generally obeyed (Or Else!).

A third female leader is the Bone Woman, whose rule of terror over the tribe of Olbar the Mountain-tall is ended in issue #9. Like many of *Elfquest*'s Humans, the Bone Woman seems to represent a negative extreme. Like Savah of the Sun Folk, she is a spiritual leader. But with the worst impulse of a religious institution, she uses her influence to maintain her power rather than to enlighten her people. What knowledge she possesses is carefully kept to herself, to be used to her own best advantage. Though in magical terms she is far from a charlatan (her bones do speak to her), much of her power, like Maggoty's, is concentrated in herbal preparations and a clever use of drugs. Unlike Maggoty, however, the Bone Woman manipulates instead of threatening. She is a very danger-character, all the more because her motives are so clear to the reader. She is greedy and selfish, but at the root of her dealings with the Elves is the impulse for survival that motivates her. Her bones have warned her that the Elves will be her downfall. Acting on this information she actually creates her own disgrace. But while we may disapprove of her actions, can any of us deny the reasoning behind them?

Among Trolls, Oddbit is the Most Beautiful Woman. To us Oddbit would seem almost unbearably ugly, with a huge frame, a nose like a limp sausage, a tiny, weak chin, warty skin, and small, squinty eyes. But to Trolls, Oddbit is the most gorgeous creature on earth, and she knows it. She flaunts it, believing herself inviolable. She flirts unmercifully with the last surviving male Troll, her suitor Picknose, giggling, fluttering her eyelashes, cuddling up to him, and lounging with elephantine seductiveness.

One is always aware of the canny mind beneath that preposterous beauty, however. It soon becomes clear to everyone, not the least to poor old Picknose, that she is only playing with him. Oddbit has no intention of marrying Picknose, even though he is literally the last man on earth, unless and until he makes himself the World's Richest Troll. Nothing less will content this most practical of damsels.

Oddbit's Elfin counterpart is Leetah, Cutter's lifemate, the Healer of the Sun Village, and daughter of the Sun-toucher (the Sun Village's high priest). Just as Oddbit is Maggoty's granddaughter, so is Leetah descended from Savah. All these relationships do not define her character, however. They merely underline her crucial position. Just as Oddbit dangles Picknose, Leetah dangles Cutter and her other suitor, Rayek – at least for a time. Where *Elfquest*'s other characters might be compared to pearls – or black

***Dewshine***

pearls, in a few cases – for solidity and purity of characterization, Leetah would have to be some other gem. A diamond, perhaps, with numerous facets and an immutable crystal structure.

In many ways, Leetah is the most complex and most central of *Elfquest*'s women. Time and again, the entire course of events pivots upon what Leetah does or does not do. The fact that she is not a simple character enhances her decisive role, for one can never be certain what she will do. Often one learns more about other characters from their reactions to Leetah than from anything else they do.

Part of the difficulty in understanding Leetah's actions is that she does not always behave in a rational, logical manner. In this she is much like most of us "real" people. At times, her behavior verges on the paradoxical, and the only thing that helps others to make sense of her is that this is Leetah.

When we first see her (*Elfquest* #2), Leetah is flirting with Rayek, her first suitor – one of those black pearls I mentioned earlier – in a manner much like Oddbit's, although Leetah seems to be dangling Rayek more for the sake of fun than to get anything out of him. Then, out of the blue, Cutter and the Wolfriders come swooping down upon the Sun Village. Compelled by Recognition, Cutter abducts Leetah.

First paradox: like many modern women who believe themselves to be independent and "liberated," Leetah discovers that her society simply has not prepared her to defend herself in a crisis situation. Captured by the Wolfriders, she is incapable of doing anything more than screaming, "Rayek, do something!" Yet when Rayek is threatened, she offers to do anything to save him. And, again, as soon as Cutter sets her down, she takes command, giving orders in the tone of an equal or superior. Clearly she very much likes to be in control of herself, and when control is taken out of her hands, she at a loss.

How to explain all of these changes, and those that followed? Well, I've heard it said that only in fiction are human beings expected to act in a reasonable manner. I agree.

And I think it is only the best writing that recognizes the essential changeability of human nature, and can portray this in a coherent form. Like most of us at one time or another, Leetah does not always act rationally. At the same time, however, she never behaves as she does without a reason.

The key to understanding Leetah's personality is her love of freedom and her need of a stable base for her life. In a normal situation, where all is as it has been for centuries, Leetah is a confident, fearless person. But in an abnormal situation, or one where her freedom is threatened, she either freezes up or acts irrationally. Unfortunately, *Elfquest*'s readers have rarely seen Leetah in a normal, non-threatening situation, and so we have rarely seen her at her best.

The primary threat to Leetah's freedom and her life order is her Recognition of Cutter. Recognition is another, particularly significant, piece of *Elfquest* lore. Briefly, Recognition is a genetically specialized form of love at first sight, taking place between two genetically ideal Elves, binding them together for life in an intense, irresistible fashion for the purpose of producing extraordinary offspring. Once Recognized, the two Elves cannot refuse each other, for if they do not become lovers or life-mates, they will quite literally die without each other.

Cutter the Wolfrider never questions Recognition, but Leetah does, resisting to the point where Cutter begins to fear death. Leetah's horrified denial of Recognition is understandable to us, because most moderns don't much go for the idea of biological predestination. To Leetah, Recognition is a deadly threat, both to her stable life and to the freedom to choose her own future. It is the greatest challenge of her life to make a place in it for Cutter, and it takes four issues for her to accept Recognition as part of the natural order, and not a violation thereof.

The second great challenge to Leetah's personality begins in issue #8. After Cutter embarks upon the quest named in the series' title, Leetah learns through Savah and her son, Suntop, that Cutter is advancing toward a great, nameless danger. Savah has expended all of her psychic strength to obtain the meager warning, and has implanted it in Suntop's mind, which only Cutter can release. Leetah therefore has no choice but to venture into the vast, unknown world outside Sorrow's End, so that Cutter and Suntop may be reunited and the danger made clear. If she refuses to leave her home, she knows that Cutter may die.

We never see Leetah's struggle to decide whether or not to leave the comfort and security of Sorrow's End, the only place she has ever lived in all her life. From our knowledge of her, we can imagine this well enough. But we do see that courageous moment when she leaves her home to seek and warn her life-mate. In the wide desert she faces the terror of the elements and finds that reality. though fearsome, is not really as bad as she had feared. Imagined danger can be more terrifying than reality itself.

Midway through issue #9, the skeletal remains of an Elf are discovered. Leetah believes them to be those of Rayek, her former suitor and dearest friend. To her surprise, she discovers that the shock and grief do not kill her. From them, as from her fear, she draws the strength to turn away and continue her journey. And in issue #10, when she finally reaches both Cutter and the dreaded forest, she at last asks to be taught how to be a Wolfrider, so she may move through the woods competently and meet them on their own terms.

* * *

There are a number of other interesting women characters, and I'll discuss them by racial groups: Sun Folk, Wolfriders, and Humans. First, the Sun Folk.

As I have mentioned, *Elfquest* features a number of prominent family groups. The most significant of these in the Sun Village is Leetah's which includes her parents, and her sister. Leetah's mother, Toorah, is a delightful lady, as settled in life as Leetah, and of a greater serenity, yet close to her two adult daughters and not above teasing them at times. Yet, Toorah is also keenly aware of the purpose of the Sun Village as a human-free

*Nightfall*

haven. Although she accepts her daughter's departure with as much grace as she can muster, it is clear she does not approve. Disapproval, however, only makes her concern show more clearly. It cannot banish her love for her daughter.

Leetah's sister is called Shenshen, and in their way the sisters are strikingly alike. Shenshen is lighthearted without being empty-headed, and she continues to enjoy the company of men, just as Leetah did before Cutter's arrival. She, too, has a personal skill – that of midwifery, a gift appropriately close to Leetah's healing. She relishes using her gift, just as Leetah enjoys healing, or perhaps even more, since she has few chances to employ it (Elves have a very low birth rate). Sometimes antagonizing, sometimes teasing, almost always affectionate, Shenshen continues to have a rich relationship with her sister, and is a major supporting character, representing, perhaps, the Sun Folk at their most open and engaging.

There is also a trio of lovely ladies who are frequently to be seen with the dashing Skywise. After all, what's a comic book without some lucky cluck that has women dripping off him all the time? In this case, his sex appeal is so exaggerated that it is impossible to take offense.

Remarkably, there is nevery any animosity shown between Skywise's three paramours (none of them has ever been named). Rather, they seem to have an informal agreement to share Skywise among themselves equally, enjoying him for what he is rather than trying to capture and cage him. This is a remarkably sensible attitude for them to take, considering how unlikely it is that Skywise will ever settle down.

Among Humans, a grand total of four women characters have appeared. This places them just above the Trolls, who are stuck at two. Of these four, the Bone Woman has already been mentioned. The first to appear as an actual character in the series was Thaya (*Elfquest* #7). She is an outcast travelling through the desert with nothing but her husband, her son, her crazed brother-in-law, and a pony. She plays mostly a supporting role to her husband, Aro, which is not surprising given the society she comes from.

The third Human woman, who first appeared in *Epic* #1 and entered the main *Elfquest* saga in #9, is Selah, daughter of Olbar the Mountain-tall. Though not an important character, she has been consistently interesting. As befits the daughter of a great chieftain, she is strong-willed and relatively fearless, carrying a flint knife and willing to use it. She is also running away with her lover, whom her father despises because he failed his test a manhood. What better guarantee of reader sympathy?

Most important of the four Human women is Nonna. She and her husband, Adar, lived alone in the forest until Cutter and Skywise helped them regain admission to Olbar's village in issue #9. Like Leetah, Nonna is (in her own quiet way) a healer, and like Savah, she dispenses a certain amount of lore as a symbol-maker. Yet unlike Thaya's people, she accepts the presence of Elves, and other supernatural beings and events without panic. She even leads Olbar's people toward her own reverent view.

Discovering Cutter in a fevered delirium, Nonna takes him in and attempts to cure him as she would a Human child (*Elfquest* #8). This alarms everyone except her husband, who also takes such good deeds (unheard of by the Wolfriders) completely for granted. There is a great deal of hostility and confusion before the Elves can accept the idea of friendly, helpful Humans. Even when Nonna's good intentions have been proven, Cutter and Skywise have difficulty believing them. Yet it is her friendship that is

crucial to both their quest and the attitude change of the Humans in issue #9.

Finally, we come to the Woman Wolfriders named in the title of this article. Despite the importance of the Sun Folk, the Wolfriders remain the central group in *Elfquest,* supplying us with every major character in the first half of the series except for Leetah and Savah. In all, there are seven – hunters, lovers, mothers; plus several other women mentioned among the departed. Since the Wolfriders are a small, closed group, the incidence of interrelationships among them is high. This contributes to the atmosphere of extreme emotional closeness among the Wolfriders, and explains the fact that not a woman among them can be found who is not actively participating in at least one relationship of some kind.

The first woman, Human or Elvish, seen in *Elfquest* was Nightfall, and in my eyes she remains the most important of the Woman Wolfriders. In many ways, Nightfall represents the very best that the Wolfriders can produce. She is strong and independent, giving an unshakeable love to her life-mate Redlance. Often, one discovers, love to the Wolfriders means protection of the beloved, be it parent, child, sibling, or mate. Just so, Nightfall insists upon remaining with her injured Redlance in the desert to defend him (*Elfquest* #2) even though there is a good chance this will mean her own death. Nightfall is also the first and almost only Wolfrider to reach out to Leetah during her struggle with Recognition, to try to help and understand. And later, she speaks in Leetah's defense before less tolerant Wolfriders. Knowing herself and her own value, Nightfall is not afraid to reach out to others. She has more courage than most, Wolfrider or modern human.

Of the others, each is an individual, with distinct strengths and weaknesses. Dewshine is Cutter's cousin, daughter of his mother's brother. She is perhaps best known for her skinny, flat-chested build (ironic that a comic book character should be unique for an un-buxom body), but is a lively young lady nonetheless. Forever to be found at the forefront of hunt and battle, she risks her life with impetuous delight.

Rainsong is the Total Mother among the Wolfriders; the soft and retiring one, possessed of an almost godlike intuition. She devotes her entire being to the care of her family in a way that somehow transcends the stereo-typical.

Moonshade seems to represent the "straight" Wolfrider, with the fierce love of her people, but less of their openness. Though not an evil character, she is not always entirely positive. She is too much a Wolfrider, unwilling or unable to open her mind to the ways of the Sun Folk. Though she lives in the Sun Village and is accustomed to their way of life, Moonshade does not truly respect it. To her, the Wolfrider's way is the only way, and her impatience with Leetah on a number of occasions underlines this intolerance.

Another woman Wolfrider, whose influence continues to be felt even after her death, is the Chieftess Joyleaf, Cutter's mother. Actually, both of Cutter's parents were significant people. Their relationship was one of ideal mutual completion. Bearclaw, the Chieftain, lived with a flair for enjoying the present that is typical of the Wolfriders – gambling, drinking, stealing the Humans' children for sport. Joyleaf was exactly his opposite, a quiet person who knew how to enjoy life without being active every second. Her specialty was wisdom, and her major task was restraining Bearclaw's hatred for Humans.

At this point I am going to steadfastly resist the temptation to embark upon a discussion of the comparative merits of active and contemplative lifestyles. Let it suffice to say that both Bearclaw and Joyleaf knew something about the art of living, and together the two of them managed to create balance and order, for the Wolfriders and for their own lives. And that's nothing to be sneezed at.

One last class of characters that is virtually unique to *Elfquest* is children, a generally forgotten minority in comics (which is really ironic, since children are the readers, at least in theory!). *Elfquest* regularly features five children, more than can be found anywhere else except the pages of *Richie Rich*. They are, not necessarily in order of importance, Suntop and Ember (Cutter and Leetah's twins), Wing and Newstar (Rainsong's two children), and Dart (son of Moonshade). All of them are portrayed with that mix-

*(continued on page 17)*

## MERRY

### The Girl of a Thousand Gimmicks

"The Return of the Rope" – 7 pgs.
*Star Spangled Comics* #84 (Sept. 1948)

CAS/SRJ

*Golden Age Girls* — *by Steve Johnson*

"Back comes The Rope, Arch-Villain of Lariat-Larceny. This time, his quest for ill-gotten goods follows a mysterious and surprising crime trail through colorful events from history and fiction. But at each turn of the road is the Star Spangled Kid's new sister-heroine, Merry, facing the peril that comes with . . . "The Return of The Rope!"

It's a deep-sea fishing voyage for Sylvester Pemberton, Sr., and his son, Sylvester (the Star-Spangled Kid), but the trip's *not* for a *girl.* So, as Merry waves from the dock to the departing boat, she surmises that with crooks on the loose, there may be more excitement right at home.

"Excitement" is right! For at that moment, in The Rope's cell at State Prison, the Rogue of the Rope is fashioning a lariat as the means of his escape, which is followed after dusk by a tightrope walk to freedom. Within the hour, Merry hears the radio report of the break-out, and with Syl away, she decides she'll have to handle this alone.

The Rope wastes no time in plotting his next crime – the robbery of a three-night, "Famous Women," charity costume contest with exotic valuables to go with the theme of each night. Night falls – and the first phase of the contest finals is underway . . . a scene from ancient Egypt. The Rope and his "Roman soldiers" quickly obtain the Cleopatra Ruby. Then, at that moment, a figure races in on a chariot reserved for the judges – Merry! The Rope makes good his escape though as his nearly-invisible, plastic trip-rope throws Merry from the speeding chariot.

The next night, at another setting, the second entry in the Famous Women contest bows in – "Marie Antoinette" in the "court" of Louis XVI. As the ancient court scene is reenacted, a huge rope spool is delivered, and the gaping onlookers see a variation of the Trojan Horse trick as the prop opens at the center and the Rope's "swordsmen" pour out. A huge rope net drops swiftly over the crowd, and The Rope swings off with his prize – a half-million dollar necklace.

The next day, at police headquarters, Merry convinces the chief to go ahead with the contest in hopes of luring The Rope with the possible loot. Hence, that night, the third contest – a stirring drama of Snow White. Meanwhile, The Rope sends in his "Seven Dwarfs" to reclaim "their" bag of gold which is being used as a prop. The crowd cowers under the threat of the gun-toting midgets, and then the Rope Rogue himself appears on the scene to claim his spoils.

*Costume: White, with blue tights and gloves; red cape and belt with gold buckle; black mask; white, medium-heel boots*
*Hair: Red*

But instead of gold, the bag contains exploding fireworks! Then, flinging off her Snow White costume, Merry goes into action using a "snow" storm of soap flakes and a giant replica of the poison apple to subdue The Rope and his men.

A day later, the Jr. and Sr. Pembertons show off their catch on their return. And Merry reflects, "That's not as big as the 'fish' *I* hooked! And I've got mine 'mounted' in State Prison!"

* * *

Since no one seems to have written much about Merry before, it's time to set the record straight on some misinformation that has been passed off for too long. *Star Spangled Comics* #81 was *not* the Gimmick Girl's origin issue. It *introduced* Merry Pemberton as Sylvester Pemberton Jr.'s adopted sister. The Sr. Pemberton, fearing that his son's odd behavior is due to a lack of companionship, adopts a young girl to play games with him. Syl learns that she is the daughter of an ex-con, Fly-Foot Creamer, who had put Merry in an orphanage to protect her when he was sent "up the river" for 10 years. He dies a hero though in this issue as he prevents some former cronies from exploiting his skills in a robbery, and the SSK swears to keep his secret. Also, Merry wastes no time in discovering the SSK's secret identity.

Merry makes her *first costumed* appearance in #82, shadows her brother, tries capturing a mad magician at gunpoint, fails, gets tied up, escapes on her own, and anonymously saves the day by substituting the villain's trick gun for a real one. Issue #83 saw the SSK and Merry in action together against The Rope, and Merry produced and used her *first gimmicks.*

*SSC* #84 featured Merry's *first solo* adventure, and the final, 3-panel appearance of the SSK (in his civilian identity only). The following two issues, #85 and #86, continued to carry the SSK's masthead, but the strips were Merry's. The former carried the subtitle "featuring Merry, The Girl With 1,000 Gimmicks" (the first time she was christened with the "gimmick" tag line), and the latter "starring Merry, The Girl of a Thousand Gimmicks."

With issue #87, Merry earned her own masthead, which carried through to her final, and most classic appearance, "The Duel of the Gimmicks," in *SSC* #90.

Merry never did use up her allotment of "a thousand gimmicks." She produced only 38 gimmicks (by my count) in her workshop, and only 2 of these were used a second time. And despite her foster brother's perchance for fisticuffs, Merry was never on the giving or receiving end of any direct physical contact during her adventures.

Otto Binder scripted Merry's appearances in these 10 issues, with Winslow Mortimer providing the art on issues #81-83, and Jon Small on #84-90.

The "Princess of the Law" appeared in:

***Adventure*** #416 (Mar. 1972)
cover app.; rpt. *SSC* #90

***Star Spangled Comics*** #81-90 (June 1948 - Mar. 1949)
with Star Spangled Kid #81-83; solo #84-90
intro, as Merry Pemberton #81; first costumed app. #82; first "gimmicks" #83
"The Girl of a Thousand Gimmicks" #85-90

Dawson '81

# REFLECTIONS OF

SRJ

***Who is Qrelon?***

Hmmm? Why, she's the heroine of the Samuel R. Delany/Howard V. Chaykin collaboration, *Empire*.

***Who is Qrelon? Who is this driven woman: heroine, villainess, friend to pirates, company to royalty, and sworn enemy to the Kunduke?***

Your question answers itself, but hear it in her own words: *The simple story . . . ? Once I lived on a lush and beautiful world: The Kunduke raped it, smashed it, twisted it and tortured it into something ugly, hideous, unfit for animal or human life. That's what the legends say – in those corners of the universe where I am legend. But when you consider how big a world is, and just how much you'd have to do to rape, smash and twist the extent of it . . . well, then you begin to realize what a simple minded story that is. The complex one – the one you might even say is true? Bah! It's too hot for stories today . . .*

There, does that satisfy you?

***No.***

Well then, we must learn what we can from the brief glimpse we get of her actions as detailed by Mssrs. Delany and Chaykin. To understand them you must have an understanding of the existence of information theory and catastrophe theory. You needn't understand the mathematics of information theory, only that it can be applied to language, concepts, processes, and problems in the field of communications. You needn't understand n-dimensional geometry to understand that if you define catastrophe as a sudden, major change, mathematics can be used to describe that change. The results of the mathematics of catastrophe theory can most easily be represented by graphs, shapes. The simpler of these shapes can be represented in only three dimensions. One of these shapes is Qrelon.

There is no theory so abstract that someone can't find a practical use for it. The Kunduke found, devised rather, some very sophisticated methods to manipulate information. Their motto, "To know is to control", can be stated as, "Knowledge is power". Any teacher or politician will verify the truth of that. The Kunduke had power and the Kunduke used it.

When we first meet Qrelon she wishes to introduce catastrophe, seven specific kinds represented by the joinings of eight pieces of a demonic statue, itself a representation of a seeming paradox in the mathematics of quantum theory, into the heart of the Kunduke data flow. She has four pieces of the "Meta-max"; four remain to be found.

***All very well, but that tells me some of the "what" of Qrelon, none of the "who"!***

Patience. The best mirror to a person is the friends, and the enemies, she keeps. Wryn, archeology student, man taken out of the ordinary by circumstance and Qrelon, is a friend. Blaz, exiled daughter of Praxis, ruined laboratory of the Kunduke, is more than a friend; she is part of the legend. Lord Akburm, ruler under the Kunduke of Cryx, planet of indigo seas and furnace sands, is a formidable enemy. The Nizerine Eleyn, she of the versatile jewels and loving clone, ruler of a pleasant and non-aligned world, is both.

The mirrors and their subject all gather for the first and crucial time at an archeological dig on one of the many planets named "Eyrth". The Kunduke had reflected on Qrelon

before, but never captured her. The Nizerine Eleyn changes that. Something – What? The cold, calculating cruelty of the Kunduke? The beauty and glamor of Qrelon? – causes Wryn to step outside of himself; precipitating him into catastrophe. Instead of executing Qrelon, he attacks the Kunduke representatives and escapes with her and the fragment of the Meta-max she has risked her life to gain. The Nizerine watches.

Beneath the seas and in the mines of Lord Akbrum's Cryx, Qrelon shows herself elegant in a miners' tavern, deadly in the streets of Malabogle, successful at finding the piece of Meta-max in the tunnels, and always, always, in command. The distorted mirror of miner Grimke images her command as she selects him from the crowd, sends him unquestioning into danger, and introduces him to catastrophe – the surface of his own world.

The glaring sun of Cryx's desert strikes hard, callous reflections of Qrelon. She abandons Grimke to the tunnels and the Kunduke. She claims spiritual kinship with desert raiders. She tells Wryn point blank that she would abandon him if it furthered her revenge. She does abandon him, trapped aboard a luxury liner set down to watch a Cryx sandset, when her group is attacked by Lord Akbrum.

The Nizerine Eleyn reflects a younger Qrelon. She is beautiful, wealthy, powerful – and uncertain. She knows that her wealth and power are as nothing if the Kunduke move against her. Yet she also knows that to request Kunduke protection from her present position of weakness will result in little better treatment, for her world and the other non-aligned worlds she unofficially leads, than they would receive from outright defeat. She would bargain from a position of strength and has made catastrophic plans to that end. It is her misfortune that Wryn is with her when the liner finds the ship she had had destroyed. His sudden presence changes the nature of the catastrophe so that he delivers the seventh piece of Meta-max to Qrelon.

What of Blaz, she of the pointed ears and more deadly pointed homing-blades? She is a mirror indeed! Hurt differently, but no less, she knows Qrelon better than Qrelon knows herself. Blaz can express their pain in words as well as deeds. Blaz can take the time to explain to a puzzeled Wryn and teach him the art of the homing-blades. Blaz can show the tenderness towards a pirate's son that Qrelon cannot allow herself to feel for Wryn. But Blaz comes to Qrelon's call. She is one who walks behind and protects Qrelon, even from Qrelon.

Armed with information from the dead brain of the man instrumental to the construction of the Kunduke information system *and* Meta-max, Qrelon, Blaz, and Wryn flee to Praxis. There they plan to gain the last piece and take Meta-max to Ice, introducing catastrophe into the center of the Kunduke information storage and distribution device at Praxis' south pole.

They are distracted. The Nizerine Eleyn has called a last, desperate meeting of the rulers of the non-aligned worlds, here at the beginnings of the Kunduke power, to emphasize her pleas for their backing as she bargains. With a change of outer clothing, and an assumption of authority, Qrelon joins the crowd to seek out Eleyn. The actions

of the crowd, and of Eleyn herself, reflect that the authority is rightfully hers.

Qrelon tells Eleyn that she, too, once bargained with the Kunduke: *If you love power, the Kunduke will give you more and more of it, till you go mad with it. But if you love your world, you will see it starved, standardized. . . and you will go mad much sooner.*

The near catastrophic attack by Lord Akrum on the gathering provides a shattering reflection of her words.

Another reflection of Qrelon: Her answers of compasionate silence to Eleyn's question, "How does terror articulate with terror?" Yet another when she surrenders to the Kunduke so that Wryn can take Meta-max to Ice. Still another as she risks her life to rescue Wryn *after* he succeeds.

One last double reflection of Qrelon: Ice is broken, the Kunduke empire dead, but worlds have to be taught to live again; Qrelon cannot rest. On his own world, at his own university, Wryn almost turns back to go with Qrelon, but her way is not his. His catastrophe has peaked and his life must now run peacefully in its new channel for a while. Blaz knows, and with a simple sentence that means more than it says, she articulates their feelings. And Qrelon is gone; for catastrophe is her life.

This then, reflections, and reflections of reflections, is all that we may know about the "who" of Qrelon. Are your questions answered?

***Why is Qrelon?***

Because she is needed. – *Gerald Perkins* □

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**THE WOMEN WOLFRIDERS** *(cont. from pg. 11)*

ture of innocence and wisdom typical of all but the youngest of children, and all possess the bouncy self-assurance of children who never doubt that they are loved.

* * *

The farther I get with this article, the more I realize the futility of trying to talk about *Elfquest* without talking about its men. It's true, a few names have crept in here and there despite me. Cutter. Skywise. Redlance. Picknose. Fascinating names for fascinating characters. I haven't begun to give them the attention they deserve.

Unfortunately, I can't do that at all. I knew when I started that I would have to limit myself somehow; there is far more to *Elfquest* than one article could ever cover with its limitations on space and reader interest. The men of *Elfquest* are a whole 'nother barrel of monkeys, and I'm having trouble enough being concise. Still, I hope it is clear that even though there are more, and better, women in one issue of *Elfquest* than in ten issues of the next best comic – and that is definitely not a statement I make lightly – no reading of *Elfquest* could ever be complete that did not include the men.

Having got this off my chest, I can go on to point out one final thing that, I think, accounts for the ultimate success of *Elfquest,* and that is its treatment of the characters. A comic can have characters of every conceivable sort, but they would all be cardboard cutouts without the author's respect for each and every one of them. In a letter to me, Richard Pini wrote, " . . . it's not so mch a case of sitting down one day and plotting it (*Elfquest*) as it is a case of knowing each and every character intimately and letting the story flow." It is that kind of care that makes *Elfquest* what it is.

With all the odd-type people in *Elfquest*, the men and women, the children and old people, the Elves, Trolls, and Humans, there is hardly one of them not known and respected as a person. The cast of *Elfquest* includes a tremendous variety, and yet each person is valued for what they are. Thus the full range of humanity, good, bad, and neutral is acknowledged and approved. To be fully human is to have something of each of them in us, and there is nothing wrong with that.

The message of *Elfquest* is just that any examination of the human character, in all of its manifestations, recognizes that it is this variety that makes humanity what it is. *Elfquest* is about being human – what it means, how we do it, and maybe, just a little, of what humanity *could* mean and be. (*To be continued, of course!*) □

# BEWARE THE BLACK WIDOW

**by Howard Stangroom (with Gerald Perkins)**

SRJ/LAD

It's surprising, considering the quality (or lack thereof) of her early appearances, that Natasha Romanoff lasted more than two months; more surprising, to the newer reader, is the fact that the aggressive Black Widow of today began as one of comics' most tired stereotypes, the "Beautiful Spy."

Her debut was as a villainess in the Iron Man series – *Tales of Suspense* #52, April 1964, to be exact. Judging by the cover blurbs, someone in the editorial department was pretty excited – hard to see why – since, in keeping with Uncle Stan's "Reds Under the Bed" hysteria of the time, she was a Commie spy sent to vamp Tony Stark while her partner, the Crimson Dynamo, wrecked Stark's factories. But she was so cliched (pillbox hat, stillettos, 12 foot cigarette holder, etc.) that she was almost comic relief, and destroyed what little credibility the story had. She escaped in the final panel, and reappeared the next issue (titled, with a shattering originality, "The Black Widow Strikes Again!"), and was a more imposing enemy. Performing a creditable job of secret-snatching, she took an anti-gravity device from under Stark's nose and caused what must have been several billion dollars worth of damage before Iron Man came up with a neutralizer. Despite that, he didn't seem inclined to pursue her very hard, for she escaped *again* at story's end, and was never actually *captured* by anyone during her villainous phase.

That story *should* have exhausted Natasha's potential as a nemesis; she played well on Stark's weakness for women, but in a fracas with his armoured alter-ego, she wasn't *exactly* of heavyweight class . . . yet reaction to her two-part premiere was so favourable that she had to make a comeback . . . and so, she did, with a brand-new gimmick.

The gimmick's name was Hawkeye the Marksman (the closest that Marvel ever came to producing a male "dumb blonde"), and the team worked beautifully, her intellect, and his skill giving Shellhead, in successive appearances, a much harder time than they should have, considering his advantage. But soon it became clear, while the Widow was initially just using the infatuated Hawkeye, she now returned his affections, and was unhappy because she and Hawk were separated, not only by conflicting ideologies (though hers required frequent "therapy" to rid her of decadent impulses), but also by her Kremlin Komrads, who swooped down every so often to drag her back to the motherland . . . a typical Marvel romantic triangle, in fact, with the twist that the third party was the Communist regime! But things looked up in *Tales of Suspense* #64, when she donned her costume . . . gee whiz, black satin and fishnet tights! (Don't laugh; for 1965, a year still heavily under the CCA's thumb, that was pretty heavy going.) In addition to the fetishist gear, she gained a "web-line" and the ability to "wall-crawl" . . . sound familiar? *Some* change was necessary – these were rapidly becoming the "swinging" sixties, and her vamp pose was dated – but

becoming a female Spider-Man blunted her personality and sped her on the dreary road to righteousness.

After an altercation with the KGB in which Natasha was shot and believed killed, Hawkeye meandered over to join the Avengers, and it was in #29 of that title that a recovered, freshly-brain-washed Black Widow, flanked by the Swordsman and Power Man, battled the Avengers. Escaping again, due to the inability of Hawkeye to raise a hand against her, she next turned up in #32, a non-costume cameo, and alerted the Avengers to the menace of the Sons of the Serpent. Presumably, between her last appearance and this, she got in touch with S.H.I.E.L.D. and got herself "de-programmed," since there's no other explanation for her change of heart. In any event, she was now a heroine, albeit one with a shady past, and that came in handy later when she threatened to kill the villian of an issue unless he released the captive Avengers, something that – owing to one of those dumb heroic "oaths" – no Avenger could have done. Assigned by S.H.I.E.L.D. to Red China, in #38, she was to convince the authorities there that she was still loyal to them. But almost upon landing, she was fed into the Psychotron, a machine that induced madness by hallucination, so I get the impression that her pleas of loyalty weren't 100% accepted. But she threw the Psychotron's effects off (hell, she should've been used to psychic warfare by *now!*), and made an abortive escape attempt, which displeased the General in charge of the project, subjecting Natasha to yet *more* mental manipulation. He discoverd that she had been able to resist the Psychotron because of her firm belief in the justice of the Communist cause and devotion to its leaders! (This faith, of course, was a result of some skillful psyche-engineering on S.H.I.E.L.D.'s part.)

The Widow's story had been told in short "interludes" between chapters of Avengers stories, so it wasn't unexpected when Hawkeye and Hercules launched a two-man rescue mission. And they were followed in due course by the rest of the Avengers, who came up against the Red Guardian, a Communist super-agent who turned out to be Alexi Romanoff, the Widow's husband, whom she believed (so she claimed) to have been killed years before. (But more on that later.) In the denouement, the Red Guardian was killed and the Widow injured. Although convalescent by the issue's close, she announced that she wouldn't be returning to heroic life.

Yet nobody knew what to *do* with Natasha as a non-costumed supporting character; all she did, in several cameos, was stand around in high-fashion outifts and bitch at Hawk because he never took her anywhere, something much more suited to Sue Storm. And so, barely a year after her "retirement" she donned her costume again in *Avengers* #57, an event somewhat overshadowed by the debut of the Vision in that same issue.

After a confusing crossover between *Captain Marvel* #14, *Sub-Mariner* #16 and *Avengers* #63, which some fans I know are *still* trying to work out, she surfaced in *Avengers*;

it was her first appearance in a year, her last in her old costume, and she told Hawkeye (by this time, Goliath) that she didn't want to play with him no more. No explanation for her decision, beyond vague remarks that she "grew out of him" was ever made.

In *Amazing Spider-Man* #86, a peculiar story, she developed a sudden inferiority complex, adopted her new costume, and attacked Spider-Man, uttering such deathless lines as "Don't think I'm helpless just because I'm soft and cuddly!"

Yet the strangest thing about this issue was an origin recap in which Natasha mused that she had been forced to become the Black Widow because the Communist authorities were holding her *husband* under threat of death. While in *Tales of Suspense* #64, a similar flashback had stated it was her *parents* that were under such threat, and in *Avengers*, she said that her husband was dead *before* she started espionage training. To further confuse the issue, a later flashback in *Daredevil* claimed that her parents had *died* in 1945, and had entrusted the infant Natasha to Ivan Petrovich's care, so they *couldn't* have been under threat in *Tales of Suspense* #66, could they?

But all these contradictions can be explained by remembering one fact; all these conflicting stories were told by Natasha *herself*, save for the *Daredevil* flashback, which was told by Ivan, and *she* could quite easily have been *lying*, for reasons of her own. Assuming that her parents did die in 1945, and that she and Ivan fell into the hands of the Communist Espionage organizations, she and her husband, Alexi, could have been trained separately to become the Communist answer to a "master race" of deadly agents. Each *could* have been held as a hostage to ensure the other's cooperation, and so, when Natasha took up with Hawkeye, she would naturally have "edited" her origin story for his benefit. After all, since their affair was at first, purely sexual (that wasn't stated, of course, owing to the Code, but as femme fan Klobberin' Kath Glance remarked, "You're not telling *me* he fought Iron Man time and again, against the dictates of his own conscience, for no greater reward than a few kind words!"), he wouldn't have taken too kindly the news that he was shacking up with a married woman.

In 1970, the experimental title *Amazing Adventures*, saw the first of the Widow's own series; she renounced the spy bit, abandoned her secret I.D., produced her chauffeur/aide, Ivan, and took up a kind of "super-social work", crusading against the Underworld and general oppressors of the poor. She helped slum kids, met Paul Hamilton of the N.Y. press (a supremely forgettable attempt at a love interest) and was taken over by Mimi Gold, a Marvel colourist, in an experiment to see how a woman would write a heroine feature. It didn't work; Gold's Widow was forced and two-dimensional. The art was fine, though; first John Buscema, then the Colan/Everett team combined to produce the best art she ever had. But presently the strip was put into the hands of Roy Thomas and Don Heck, and suffered a fate worse than death. For the rest of the series' short run, Thomas gave the Widow a "curse" which destroyed those around her, and the strip floundered in soap-opera histrionics. With Amazing Adventures #8, she left the book; apparently she just hadn't "mass audience" appeal, though the hasty, blurred cover vignettes (often drawn before the story was written) could hardly have helped.

*Daredevil* #81, "Death Is A Woman Called Widow", brought Natasha into DD's life, and began the silliest phase of her life yet. Well, it wasn't so bad at first; up until about issue #90, DD and the Widow were in danger of developing a *believable* relationship, but *that*, apparently, wasn't interesting enough for the readers, so Natasha started bitching

about her status in the team, claiming that she'd been reduced to the level of "Robin, The Boy Wonder", an attitude that was largely unjustified, despite DD's shallow and patronizing behavior (which after all is his trademark). The art chores were kicked around to whoever happened to be passing through the office at the time, and the series faltered, with a resultant drop in sales which led to Natasha's being written out of the book as of #124.

That led to the Champions, a "make a fast buck" abortion of a team that ranks second only to the Super-Sons as the worst continued series ever. In a logical move (one of the few such in her career), Natasha was appointed team leader in view of her years of combat experience. But having been instrumental in electing her, the Angel and the Iceman constantly undermined her authority, pointing out that they "weren't amateurs" and "had done this before". Surprisingly, Marvel's No. 1 M.P.C. (Male Chauvenist Pig), Hercules, obeyed her, though more out of lust for her body than respect for her mind.

The Champions, to no one's surprise, fell apart, and after a brief flirtation with the Avengers, Natasha went back to Daredevil, where she became involved in an undignified squabble with *two* other women for the dubious benefits of Mr. Murdock's affections. But the only roles allowed her were those of comforter and bait. In *Daredevil* #165 she forlornly offers to help Matt rescue Heather Glenn from Dr. Octopus only to be told, "We're friends, Natasha. That's all we ever can be . . . now." Uncharacteristically, she sits home until after the action is finished, arriving on the scene just in time to see DD declare his love for Heather. The story ends with a newsclipping informing us that Natasha Romanov had returned to her native Russia.

Pitiful. If the Widow was that suicidally depressed, she needed to be hospitalized for her own safety! It would be as well for her to walk into the arms of a Russian bear as to return to the spymasters she had betrayed so thoroughly. Perhaps it's the editors at Marvel who need to be put away until their creative imaginations have recovered. Surely there is a better way to write a popular character out of the Marvel Universe. And they'll probably bring her back as a brainwashed spy again. Poor Natasha, her mind has been changed for her so often that it's a wonder she has any left.

And consider what it does to the reader's mind when the Black Widow pops up again in *Marvel Team-Up* #98 and *Bizzare Adventures* (nee *Marvel Preview*) #25, published respectively three and eight months after *Daredevil* #165. *Marvel Team-Up* #98 is the conclusion of DD and Spider-Man's encounter with The Owl. Marv Wolfman plotted it, which is one thing in its favor. The other is the introduction of Simon Stroud, ex-CIA, ex-nemisis to Morbius the Living Vampire, and now free-lance investigator, as The Widow's partner. These two would make a good team. The possibility of more Stroud/Romanov stories would be there at the end of *Marvel Team-Up* #98 if not for *Daredevil* #165.

Lynn Graeme promised us the "Lethal Ladies" issue of *Marvel Premier* for months,

but was unable to deliver it until March 1981. "I Got the Yo-yo . . . You Got the String" is quite a departure from any version of the Black Widow seen before. In this tale of sordid multiple deception and unnecessary deaths, a hung-over Natasha is awakened on New Year's Day by a summons from her employer, S.H.I.E.L.D. She is to break up a communist gun-running operation in Africa and eliminate her Russian instructor in the spy arts, Irma Klausvichnova. She accepts, without a qualm, not knowing that S.H.I.E.L.D. has already replaced Klausvichnova with a double of their own. By the end of the story the gun-running operation is dead, the double is dead, the man for whom the S.H.I.E.L.D. action was a trap is dead, and Natasha Romanov has been violated in every way but physically. It's a cheerful little story; very much in keeping with today's view of the spy business.

Was it necessary? It's doubtful. Ralph Macchio did a fairly good job of writing, but added nothing to a story that has been told many times before. It certainly does not fit the character of the Black Widow as developed, however poorly and inc nsistantly, in her previous appearances.

Within the time frame of the Marvel Universe, *Marvel Team-Up* #98 and *Bizzare Adventures* #25 probably take place before *Daredevil* #165. Better that they had been published before hand and that *Daredevil* #165 had ended without the newspaper clipping.

But there are also rumours of a proposed Black Widow title, though I can't see it catching on, for several reasons: 1) The Widow's always worked best in an espionage environment – and spies just don't *sell* these days; 2) Natasha is never effective on her own; like Mr. Spock or the Vision, she is a natural supporting character who must be seen in the context of a partner or team to be at their best; 3) Her powers are derivative; in 1964, she was clearly designed as the female analog of Spider-Man, and no real attempt has been made to alter that side of her image. And now, of course, it's too late; all the "spider-schtiks" not already owned by Spider-*Man* have been given to Spider-*Woman* in an attempt to differentiate the two.

No, the best hope – that I can see – would be for Hawkeye to take up with the Widow again. Yet even *that* seems unlikely in view of the fact that DC's Ace Archer is currently palling around with a lady of "Black" appellation . . . and while the Widow and the Canary may differ in origin and personality, their m.o.'s are strikingly similar.

The Black Widow's history is, by and large, one of wasted potential, passed around from one writer to another, none of whom seemed pleased to have her. She's been an imitation Mata Hari, an imitation Peter Parker, an imitation Modesty Blaise, and for awhile – back when Angie Bowie was said to be interested in making a film of her – an imitation Geomaine Greer, a "Rebel Without A Bra" so one-dimensional that she was, again, almost a comedy figure.

What she's never been is herself, with the result that her "Widow's curse" applies, not to the men in her life, but to the books she appears in, most of which drop to bi-monthly or are cancelled altogether.

Since she's been around so long, Marvel would be reluctant to kill her off, but unless they come up with some uniform editorial policy on how this woman should be handled, I really thing a quick death would be kinder than prolonging the agony.□

# VIEWS REVIEWS

**Dernyi Rising** *by Katherine Kurtz*
*Ballantine Books, 1970*

Recently, as I was casually flipping through a little paper book of unusual names for babies, I burst into hysterical laughter out of a clear blue sky, much to the surprise of the friend who had loaned it to me. I had discovered that the name "Charissa" means "dearest little schemer."

What this all has to do with anything is that Charissa happens to be the name of the villainess of Katherine Kurtz's novel, *Deryni Rising.* Aside from the villainess' lovely name, *Deryni Rising* has a number of things going for it, not the least of which is Charissa herself. Good, convincingly evil villainesses tend to be few and far between, and Charissa is one worth celebrating: beautiful, evil, ambitious, dedicated to revenge – and yes, a most effective schemer.

A second notable woman character of *Deryni Rising* is Jehana, Dowager Queen of Gwynnedd, a religious fanatic who endangers her son's life more than once in her efforts to save his soul. Jehana's feelings are consistently ignored or lightly put aside by the book's male heroes (including her son, Kelson, who, at fourteen, has abruptly become King of Gwynnedd, after his father's death at Charissa's hands), all of whom are convinced that they know better than she. Instead of respecting Jehana's urgent love for Kelson, the hero, my Lord General Alaric Anthony Morgan, Duke of Corwyn, tends to treat her as an empty-headed (if lovely) female, blind at best and stupid at worst, who wouldn't know best for her own son if she was the Virgin Mary. This patronizing attitude goaded me into hoping at several points that Charissa might win after all, at least over General Morgan.

Probably the best part of the whole novel, however, is its convincing setting. Few "medieval" fantasies these days bother to create such a realistic background. But this one is medieval all the way. There are a lot of bishops and other churchmen who get heavily into politics, just as they did in the real Middle Ages. And, again just as in the real Middle Ages, the King has to fight his Council Lords to get anything done at all, especially when the King is a boy of fourteen. In fact, the worst problem Kelson has in *Deryni Rising* is keeping the Council Lords from executing his most essential ally, General Morgan, before the Crown can be secured against Charissa's rival claim. The story is a hair-raiser, the reader uncertain whether Kelson can defeat Charissa with his fledgeling magical powers until he actually does so.

While not being the most current book to be covering in a review column, I feel that it is appropriate to spotlight books in both Science Fiction and Fantasy that feature very good (or very bad) women as characters which friendly readers and fellow CHeFaC members may enjoy. – *Deby Dunn*

**A Dark Horn Blowing** *by Dahlov Ipcar*
*Viking Press, 1978*

Here is a tale told in the true High Fantasy style, and one worthy of that style, complete with heroine and villainess.

Nora is the heroine, a mortal woman of (forgotten) royal descent, who is stolen away from her husband and newborn son, to nurse the infant Prince Elver in Elfland. The villainess is Bab Magga, an evil witch in the true darksome-hut-and-bubbling-cauldron tradition, who steals Nora's husband and abuses her son after Nora has been abducted. But probably the most remarkable character is the invalid Elfin Queen, an ambiguous figure of frost-white beauty and frozen desolation, who is evil because she orders

SRJ

Nora's abduction, and yet good because she pities Nora's loneliness and protects he from the advances of the grotesque and lustful Elfin King.

This one comes right down to the wire, to an ending not as surprising as it is satisfying, with liberty and/or justice for all those deserving. – *Deby Dunn*

**Satyrday** *by Stephen Bauer*
*Berkley Publishing Corp., 1980*

The plot of Stephen Bauer's *Satyrday* is simple. An evil owl steals the moon from the sky and plots to kill the sun, so that he may rule a world of eternal night. A number of complex and fascinating characters become involved in the foiling of this grand scheme; Matthew the Satyr, a reluctant father; Derrin the Boy, a reluctant son; Dierdre the Raven, who heads the counter-plot with true revolutionary dedication and sense of self-importance; Vera, a magical Snow Fox who says she will aid the venture only to a point, and means exactly what she says; the Sun and the Moon, a pair of mutually impatient, contemptuous and slightly conceited, yet also ultimately loving, celestial sisters; Condor the Raven, who suffers unrequited love for Dierdre, and finally carries her work to its conclusion. There is even a villainess, an elderly Raven known as "the crone" who spies for the Owl and dies, ironically, just when he needs her the most.

It would be a betrayal of this book to tell the ending, except that the villains aren't the only ones to die, and nothing turns out quite the way such stories usually turn out. There are more true lessons, taught less pompously, than you can shake a stick at. But even so, Aesop's Fables this is not. It *is* a very good story. If you're going to buy it, try to get it in hardcover. I find that a lot of people want to borrow it. – *Deby Dunn*

**Katy Con 1981**
*Santa Barbara, California*

High on the list of forgotten (but not *really* forgotten) comic heroines is Katy Keene, the original Dial H for Heroine. During her heyday decade of the '50s, Katy's pages provided encouragement to hundreds of talented kids who sent in and had printed their dress designs, cars, rocket ships, and even horses. The pleasantly minimal stories in Katy Keene revolved around her Hollywood adventures with such characters as: Sis, Katy's candy loving kid sister; movie stars Lucki Red and Gloria Grandbilt; and boyfriends K. O. Kelly, the boxer, and Errol Swoon (guess his profession!). Mostly the stories provided excuses to draw Katy and friends in countless '50s fantasy outfits designed by Katy's 9 to 12 year old fans. In 1960, when comics were at the deepest pit of their downward swing, Katy's publishers, Archie Comics, unceremoniously dumped her, but a comic that has been as kind to its fans as Katy Keene doesn't die as easily as that.

On January 1, 1981, Katy's creator, Bill Woggon, turned 70 years old, and three days earlier, Steve Leialoha and I drove down to Santa Barbara to attend the first Katycon, a birthday party for Bill Woggon given by those very same 1950s fans, now grown up. The guests ranged in diversity from Steve, who'd drawn Spiderwoman paperdolls for the Katycon newsletter, to DC's E. Nelson Bridwell, and poster artist Rick Griffin with his wife, Ida, who is also an artist and who had brought along her Katy Keene collection. I was interested to see how Katy spanned the sexes – three of her biggest fans present, who'd contributed designs to the comic as kids, were Craig Leavitt, John Lucas, and Barbara Rausch – two men and a woman.

Bill Woggon is a distinguished, white haired gentleman who reminded me of both C. C. Beck and Colonel Sanders. He is quick to acknowledge the people who worked for him, including three women. I had the good fortune to sit next to one of them. Dorothy Hunter, an ex-fashion illustrator (now interior decorator) who drew the paperdolls of Sis and Bertha, Katy's fat friend, for Bill Woggon. Listening to Bill Woggon talk made it clear why his fans have never deserted him. He told us that when it came to picking designs for the comic, he always kept an eye out for kids who seemed as though they

KK
TRINA ROBBINS,
WITH THANKS TO
BILL WOGGON

could use that extra pat on the back of encouragement, and indeed, Katy Keene pinups were full of credits for Katy's barrettes and Katy's bracelets – anything to include that extra contributor to whom getting printed meant everything in the world. And of course Bill Woggon printed his fan's designs with no strings attached, as differing from DC, which actually makes the poor kids sign Work for Hire contracts when sending in designs!

Today, instead of looking dated, my Katy Keene comics from the '50s look more fashionable than ever – Katy's leopard print pedal pushers, cha cha skirts and bubble dresses are amazingly new wave. The artwork – clean and stylish – holds up beautifully, too. Recently I presented my 10-year-old daughter with a bunch of comics to read. I included Dial H for Hero (for which she showed absolutely no interest), several Archies, and Katy Keene. Katy won her personal popularity contest hands down, and Casey was very disappointed to learn that there was no longer a Katy Keene in print for her to send designs to. In today's comics world, where there's nothing at all to appeal to young girls, where are you, Katy Keene, now that we need you? – *Trina Robbins*

**Crystal Night** *by Sharon Rudahl*
*Kitchen Sink, $1.25*

First of all, if the only heroine you will tolerate is a costumed superperson from Marvel Comics, don't even bother reading the rest of this page. Sharon Rudahl's Crystal Night bears absolutely no resemblance to any Marvel or DC character, visually or conceptually. Drawn in the artist's unique style, which at times resembles a cross between H. G. Peters and Thomas Hart Benton, Crystal Night is the novelized third in a series of comics Rudahl has done, depicting her personal future universe. Like "Noblesse Olige" in *Wet Satin*, and "Saturday Night at Rancho Futura" from *Dope Comics*, it takes place on an Earth where bored Aristors live unspeakably decadent lives high above teeming cities, the bowels of which crawl with wretched Mutes, Peds, or Walkers. (Rudahl herself is a Walker, the only person in the entire city of Los Angeles who doesn't own a car.) Walkers will even mortgage their vital parts to organ banks for desperately needed spare credits. One such old couple has finally scraped together enough credits to buy a rebuilt floater for their son, but he can't afford to pay the rent on landing space for the machine. So they leave scraps of food for him on the roof and proudly watch him pass overhead, a flying Dutchman of the future. And they are joyful in their knowledge that he's "finally made it out of the barrio."

Into this world is born Crystal Night, unauthorized child of Peds. She is saved from the Centroburo clinics, where unauthorized babies are grown for organ tranfers, by being adopted and raised with the clone/daughter of an Aristo, Madame Vera Mitsubishi-Strauss. A servant enthuses about the great opportunities awaiting the infant Crystal as a Mitsubishi-Strauss, "She'll wear *genuine* polyester!" Madame Vera names her after the infamous 1938 "kristallnach" of Nazi Germany, the night 30,000 Jews were arrested and glass from the broken windows of Jewish homes and shops glittered like crystals in the streets of Berlin.

Sharon Rudahl's fans know that she always draws herself in her comics – in "Noblesse Oblige," the heroine *is* a future Sharon Rudahl. Crystal Night also is not only a ringer for Rudahl, but like her, is an aggressive, rebellious, uppity woman, born with the inability to keep a pair of white gloves clean, to speak only when spoken to, or to be a "lady." In other words, she's a Human Woman as Tough Heroine, and a pleasure to relate to. The story is equally a pleasure to read. The writing style is intelligent, witty, ironic. Home for the Holidays from Marsport Academy, Crystal discovers that her cloned step-sister, Lydia Erhart Fuller IV, Augmented, has become a closet liberal, distributing gene catalogs, and dental floss among the Peds. Arguing for their humanity, she tells her sister, "They *are* people, Crystal, even tho they didn't come out of test tubes!"

Rudahl credits Philip K. Dick with inspiration, and that inspiration is especially noticeable in the person of a kindhearted, clumsy, alien named Golb, who has a fondness

for Mississippi John Hurt. To find out the alien's role in the story Holy Mother of Test Tubes! – read the book! The extremely un-Marvel/DC style may take some getting used to, and the story reads more like a Philip K. Dick novel than a copy of the *X-Men*, but it's well worth the effort required. – *Trina Robbins*

**Amazing Spider-Man** #194,195
*Marvel Comics Group, 1979*

I like cats. (No ~~shew~~ news.) When Marvel introduced the Black Cat in *Spider-Man* #194, they were assured of my interest for as long as she appeared. Here we had a new woman who's major extraordinary talents are physical agility to match Spidey's, the strength to put that agility to best use, and the ability to hold up her end of the conversation. Then she has such a pleasantly dishonest method of accomplishing a laudable goal.

We meet the Black Cat on the splash page of #194 as she's about to break *into* the 54th precinct records room. That's a nice touch. After all, if you want to recruit criminals, you can't go down to the local employment agency. She gets her "muscle" in the form of one Bruno, strong, not too bright, but knows a good thing when he sees one. For "breaking and entering," she gets a real expert in Dr. Korpse. She does a nice job of playing mystery woman in both cases.

We then segue to the title character of the magazine who has a eye for the female form, particularly when the owner of said form is taking the same aerial road he favors. Unfortunately, the Black Cat is on her way to buy some illegal munitions. Spidey feels he must interrupt. Ain't that a kick in the rear (p. 16, frame 4)? This provides the excuse for some good fight scenes where both combatants are basically on the same level. (Spidey's sticking powers see very little use.) The Black Cat seems to be able to call down bad luck, as when a rack of guns collapses on Spider-Man, but she leaves him wondering with the traditional "womanly wiles" of frank admiration and a big kiss.

I got a chuckle out of Black Cat informing her hirelings that they needed merely to have asked to have found out that they were going to break *into* prison. We get a fight scene at the prison which is abbreviated when Spidey gets blown away because he was too distracted to notice Korpse's explosives were about to demolish part of the wall. That kind of distraction hardly needs a "bad luck" talent. End of #194, with a promise of more in #195.

Four major things bothered me in #194. One is BC's comment that she studied two years to be ready for the job at hand. Nonsense! To gain the skill she shows, you begin at age three and work until you are unable to continue. The second is that silly mask. With that much face showing, any good artist or police identikit could come up with all of her features. The third objection is Spidey's allowing her to get close enough to kiss him. That's more than close enough to kill him, and he's too experienced an infighter to allow that. The fourth is BC's "powers" of causing bad luck, and maybe, hypnotism. Basically, they are too derivative, particularly of the Scarlet Witch.

Something of the creative origin of BC is mentioned in the letter column, but not much. Had she appeared in *Spider-Woman*, she'd undoubtedly have been more sinister.

*Spider-Man* #195 opens with the Black Cat escaping from prison with a famous cat burglar while Spidey finds out he has a dislocated shoulder. BC delivers Walter Hardy to his home, then confesses that she is his daughter. Her parents tried to hide Hardy's im-

prisonment from her, but she found out and modelled her life on his. During her confession, we find out that she had indeed put in the necessary work to get her talents. She is almost caught in costume by her mother, but leaves her parents together to try to enjoy Hardy's dying days.

She steps out to find an uncharacteristically angry Spider-Man waiting for her. We are then treated to a fine six-page fight, from the Hardy's riverside home, up into city highrise buildings, and back. Spidey lectures on the morality of releasing convicted felons and BC tells him to shove it. Naturally, Spider-Man wins. Or does he? Because of his injured arm, he drops BC into the river where she disappears.

That's where I get mad. That's the *third* time Spider-Man has dropped someone important into the river! This time he's done it to the Marvel female character with the greatest potential, most interesting character, and best looks to come along since before Ms. Marvel. If it wouldn't risk Tigra and Hellcat, I'd suggest dropping Stan Lee and Marv Wolfman into the river! – *Gerald Perkins*

**Amazing Spider-Man** #204,205
*Marvel Comics Group, 1980*

I awaited *Spider-Man* #204 with more than the usual eagerness. I was in no way disappointed. It would seem, from the opening, that Peter Parker is not the only person who likes to get candid shots of Spider-Man in action. However, it's work before more play, so BC is off to the Guggenheim Museum to steal a statue, the Golden Lovers. Obviously she survived her bath in the river and obviously she hasn't changed her ways, nor has she lost her talent for bringing bad luck to anyone who crosses her path. That category most definitely includes our friendly neighborhood Spider-Man. We get a fair fight scene, Spidey gets the rug – er, floor – pulled out from under him, and BC gets away, without the statue. So far, so ordinary, except for BC's crush (?) on Spidey. It does make for some different lines.

Back at her lair, Felicia is one angry cat! Her questioning of Spidey's understanding of why she steals is clearly intended as a teaser. I would *like* to believe she is under some outside compulsion. Whatever her reason, her being an arachnophile (special case) won't stop her. I hope that poster she rips isn't too hard to replace.

Felicia cases the museum again the next day and revisits it that night. One would think that someone as striking as Felicia would be recognized in or out of costume, but she's a beginner, despite all her studying of her dad's methods. An awaiting Spider-Man provides a lively fight scene, but with all those fragile valuables around, I wince every time I read it! And the conversation, I can't get away from it, remains refreshingly diffent, even the small self-satire. Remember how BC got a "kick" out of Spidey? She certainly returns the favor, with interest. I wonder which annoys Spidey more: the kick or the comment.

I was rather surprised at BC when next she went public to get the Rajah Ruby. A bid of two cents is certainly her style, though. On the other hand, why preset weapons if she can't depend on her selective luck protecting her? There's a fallacy there. She shouldn't be so hard on the bystanders. How many people are equipped to handle an ordinary criminal, never mind an acrobat? (Side-thought: Undoubtedly the most dangerous profession in the world is that of an innocent bystander. Check your local newspapers.)

At the end of *Spider-Man* #204, BC has achieved half her current goal and Marv Wolfman has left us wondering. I was really waiting for #205 because I'd been told that Wolfman had left Marvel in the middle of the story and took it with him. Sure enough, the writing credits in #205 go to David Micheline. Micheline usually does a good job, but he begins #205 by changing the whole tone of the story. First he changes the Rajah Ruby to the Eye of Eros, then makes all of BC's latest thefts romantically oriented. I could buy that if he hadn't had to change the name of the gem.

The first fight scene was well done. Keith Pollard does a lovely job of drawing BC

and Micheline keeps the conversation going in the previous vein. I do wish they didn't have to be so destructive of all those art treasures, though.

Given that BC has already gone semi-public to get the ruby, it's not too unlikely that she would appear as herself to get the last of her treasures from a collector of things romantic and erotic. Once she's done that, though, why mask herself to take the Helen Epistle? And why the gun? Is it because people understand thieves with guns whereas they don't understand thieves with luck? Pointing the gun at Spidey is out of character with her previous actions as well as her professed concern with him.

BC's contradictory actions are all neatly explained in the climax of #205. Micheline tells us that she's been stealing romantic objects for Spidey in an attempt to prove her love to him. She's transferred an intense and frustrated love for her dead father to Spider-Man! When she agrees to seek professional help, she tries to attract Spidey rather than go to a good psychiatrist, because "You're almost as good as Daddy . . . " Spidey, naturally, persuades her to go to a doctor. End of story.

I don't buy it! What's bothering me, you ask? Is it merely the change in the name of the gemstone, a thing hardly worth a "no-prize"? No! The contradictory actions are with us from the introduction of the Black Cat, but in #194 and #195 Felicia is well aware of who and what her father is and was: a dying convict, once one of the best cat burglars in the country. She is well aware that it is her parents' love for her and desire that she not be hurt that led them to maintain that Walter Hardy was dead. It's not surprising that a young woman in these circumstances would romanticize her father and wish to follow in his footsteps. It's not surprising that she should seek out her equal, even if their "professional" lives place them in conflict. But this does *not* mean that she is mentally unbalanced.

She goes about her rescue with cool competence, willing to accept the results of her actions. She shows considerable ability, physical *and* mental. She even demonstrates leadership ability. From this she has sunk to something pitiable by the end of #205. I don't know what Wolfman originally intended, but if it was this, I'm very disappointed. Micheline had a difficult assignment picking up a story in the middle, but I do wish he had taken another tack.

I hope that Marvel rehabilitates Felicia. I would like to see more of her as a fiercely independent person, neither good-girl nor bad-girl, but in the words of Kipling, "the cat that walks alone." If she wants to chase Spider-Man, fine, but there are other handsome, capable men, heroes and a few villains, around. (What if a mere "normal" man should catch her fancy?) The Black Cat could have a long and interesting career on the fringes of the law. I hope so. — *Gerald Perkins* □

M/SRJ

Dear Steve,

It was an amazing coincidence. While looking over a pile of zines to be sorted, I came across *THS* #17 and set to wondering about the where and when of *THS* #18. And son of a gun, the thing showed up only a few days later.

The front and back covers are possibly the best so far. Perkin's article was very good and to my knowledge the first time that the MacGregor series has been examined from this viewpoint.

Deby Dunn's "Paradox" was another well thought out article. It is interesting the way she views the Red Guardian's transformation into a nuclear being. The Guardian suffers from the "Superman syndrome" in that she is too powerful now to easily interact with other characters. And, I could never totally shake the feeling that the Guardian went through all that just so the Presence would have a peer to play off of.

Stangroom's feature on Batwoman adds to the concensus in a number of articles that comics indeed reflect our society in the attitude toward the cheapening of life.

"Golden Age Girls" was standard fare. The centerspread was my favorite art piece.

Phillips had some interesting points in his piece, but since I'm not very familiar with Fox's work I can't really do any quibbling.

The Supergirl piece was okay; Gibson's survey was informative, and the letters section rounded out an excellent issue.

**Steven Souza**
**51-1-1 Warren St.**
**Waltham, MA 02154**

Dear Steve,

I've really enjoyed each issue of *THS*, including Lela's beautiful *Art Portfolio* and the *THS/UK* #2. You've added a great deal of beauty to my life by bringing her work to my attention.

Also, thanks to Trina Robbin's article in *THS* #17, I bought a copy of the *Miss Fury* collection put out by Archival Press and really enjoyed it. I'm also rooting for the hoped-for interview with Tarpe Mills.

I truly appreciate and enjoy your work.

**Penny Long**
**11595 S.W. Butner, #30**
**Portland, OR 97225**

*Thank you for sharing your kind words and thoughts, Penny. They go a long way in helping all of us through the countless hours of work that go into each of our publications. – SRJ*

Steve,

I like Lela's last portfolio; it was a really nice effort. But let's see more like the one Al published. I like the variety of artists and illos featuring crossovers from different comic companies (i.e. Catwoman against Hellcat, Madame Xanadu with Clea against Umar, etc.). I think it's the crossover illos that I miss most about Al's reign as the CHFC publisher. Let's see a return, okay?

**Chuck Alligood**
**2105 Churchill Drive**
**Greensboro, NC 27410**

*As you'll discover, that's not quite what I had in mind for the next Art Portfolio, but Sheryl K.-F. contributes an improbable situation as this issue's back cover. – SRJ*

Dear Mr. Johnson,

I was pleasantly surprised to receive *The Adventuress* #10 and the *Art Portfolio* #2. I had thought that the CHFC had come to an untimely end many moons ago.

The art quality and the lovely printing job was very well done. It's nice to see such attention to quality in a fanzine. They *are* something worth waiting for!

I've been involved in comics fandom for over ten years, and it seems as though there are more exciting female characters than ever, and even well-written ones. If you *are*

still publishing *The Heroines Showcase*, I wish you would consider some of the alternative comics heroines as subjects for profiles. The fascinating Wendy Pini creations deserve a whole issue or two, at least.

**Casey Cooke**
**Route 4, Box 129**
**Keyser, WV 26726**

*You seem to have an inside line on our zines! And having gotten this far, you've probably already enjoyed Deby Dunn's feature on* Elfquest *in this issue. – SRJ*

Dear Steven,

I've just finished (but am *not* "done with") a well-*red* little book, *The Adventuress* #10. It's really okay. Not so much T&A as I'd feared, but not quite as heavy on the S.F. as I had hoped. But hey, if the action tended toward the predictable, the images were generally vivid. The equal parts of good and bad averaged out. Encourage – encourage – keep it on!

**Eric Palmquist**
**2599 Alma**
**Palo Alto, CA 94301**

Dear Steve,

Let me express my surprise and appreciation of *The Adventuress* #10. I did not know that I would enjoy it as much as I did. Especially nice was "Carroll's Cat" with the beautiful artwork that Lela is so well known for. I also enjoyed "The Visitor." The heroine is a very sympathetic character, and her cat-friends were delightful. Rudi Franke's art is incredible and fits the story beautifully.

"The Rescue Squad" story was very nice, too, but Sheryl's art was the high point for me. The sketches shown are only a modest sampling of her incredible talent.

I am not fond of poetry, so I found the story section of "The Song of Krel-Amin" more enjoyable than the poem. The art was very interesting and seemed to fit the mood and the characters.

The cover was breathtaking. I love the color red, and the gorgeous art would have made me buy it just for the cover.

**Kari Skouson**
**555 Umbarger Road, #132**
**San Jose, CA 95111**

This column is the last piece being written for *THS* #19, but even at this time it is uncertain when the book will be published. Because of mailing costs, this issue and *THS/Art Portfolio* #3 must be released together to make for even *reasonable* finances.

Production on this issue has been a nightmare almost since it started. Nick Chinn and I formed a partnership in 1981 and then got messed over by a large supplier of typesetting equipment for more than a year before a final dissolution was reached. And I'm still at the mercy of the firm to use their demo equipment to play out final versions of two major features for this issue.

Also, the equipment I'm using now is totally incompatible with the previous system, making production, which is still in progress, absolutely insane.

When work is completed on this issue, my efforts will turn to completing the long-promised *THS/AP* #3. Besides the enormous expenditure of my time and energies, these books have placed an outrageous amount of my own funds in an indefinite limbo. If you'd like to help out, please buy back issues of our zines.

On a brighter note, *TA* #11 is already shaping up nicely with contributions from Greg Espinoza and Deby Dunn.

We're still looking for the following "missing" subscribers: R. Michael Griswold (Houston, TX); Jerald Magid (Los Angeles, CA); Wes Smith (Paw Paw, MI); and John Wentworth (Alhambra, CA). Wes Smith, in particular, left us a wealth of beautiful illos that have continued to enhance our pages – the latest is this issue's centerfold. We'd love to return his art and send him his share of past Art Auctions.

A tip of the hat to Mercy for the new column masthead, and to all you very patient subscribers that have continued to support and believe in this zine.□

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| **MAGAZINE** - 8 1/2" x 11" with 2" flap<br>*Fits all Marvel, DC, Charlton, and most Warren black & white magazines* | 100 @ $ 4.70<br>300 @ $11.75<br>500 @ $19.00<br>1000 @ $34.50 | 100 @ $ 5.00<br>300 @ $12.50<br>500 @ $20.25<br>1000 @ $36.25 |
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| **TREASURY** - 10 1/2" x 13 1/2" with 2½" flap<br>*Fits all Marvel and DC oversize comics ($1.00, $1.50 & $2.00 comics)* | 100 @ $ 7.00<br>300 @ $18.25<br>500 @ $30.00<br>1000 @ $55.00 | 100 @ $ 7.25<br>300 @ $19.25<br>500 @ $31.50<br>1000 @ $58.00 |
| **TABLOID** - 12 1/4" x 10 1/4" with 2" flap<br>*Fits most folded tabloid pubs (The Buyer's Guide, Mediascene, etc.); 9 x 12 sketches, etc.* | 100 @ $ 6.00<br>300 @ $15.25<br>1000 @ $46.00 | 100 @ $ 6.50<br>300 @ $16.25<br>1000 @ $49.00 |
| **COMIC ART** - 16 3/8" x 11 3/4" with 2" flap<br>*Fits most pages of modern comic book art; and many Sunday newspaper strips* | 100 @ $ 8.50<br>300 @ $23.25<br>500 @ $38.00 | 100 @ $ 9.00<br>300 @ $24.50<br>500 @ $40.00 |
| **MAGAZINE ART** - 18" x 11 3/4" with 2" flap<br>*Fits most pages of original art of black & white magazines, and covers of modern comics* | 100 @ $ 9.75<br>300 @ $26.50<br>500 @ $43.50 | 100 @ $10.25<br>300 @ $27.75<br>500 @ $45.50 |

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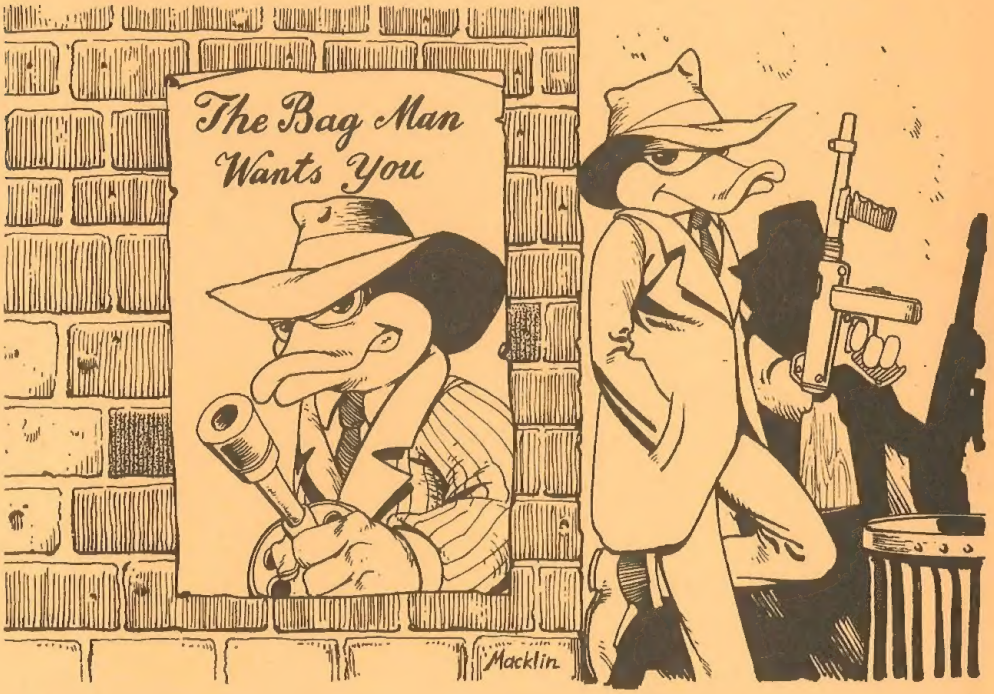


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